

CHAPTEE VI THE
PEASANTS' RISING OF 1381

THE continuous history of political and religious development in England is at this point broken short by a great incident; for such is the Peasants' Rising in its relation to the train of events and the growth and decay of institutions which we have traced in the preceding chapters. Its effect on administrative and parliamentary affairs was almost nothing, its effect on religion was only the casual reaction of events really extraneous to the quarrels of Bishop and reformer. But the Peasants' Rising, though only incidental to the rest of English affairs, is an organic part of the history of labour, and throws more light on the aspirations and qualities of the working class than any other record of mediaeval times. The work of trained scholars has of late years opened out new fields of inquiry into the past, has shown us from Manor Rolls and bailiffs' accounts the actual conditions under which the emancipation of the feudal serf took place—a story of profound importance and interest, but, taken by itself, not specially enlivening or attractive. The story of this great process in English civilisation is completed by the startling events of 1381, which give a human and spiritual interest to the economic facts of the period, showing the peasant as a man, half beast and half angel, not a mere item in the bailiffs' books. To all who have read the story of this terrible summer, a manorial roll of the fourteenth century becomes a record of real and stirring life, in which hope and despair, defiance and servile submission, surged up and sank and rose again during that long century of labour war. The dramatic interest of the Rising itself has always been